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RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 4989
RUEHIN/AIT TAIPEI PRIORITY 2825
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RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 002077

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/21/2018
TAGS: MARR PREL PGOV PINS KS
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S INTRODUCTORY CALL ON ROK MINISTER OF
NATIONAL DEFENSE

Classified By: AMBASSADOR KATHLEEN STEVENS. REASON 1.4 (b/d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) During her October 22 introductory office call on Lee Sang-hee, ROK Minister of National Defense:

--- Ambassador Stephens and the Minister swapped positive reports on the October 17 U.S.-ROK Security Consultative Meeting. Lee cited in particular its helpfulness in allaying Korean concerns regarding OPCON transfer.

--- The Ambassador provided assurance the USG has a strong interest in broadening and deepening our bilateral relationship into the 21st Century Strategic Alliance called for by our two Presidents.

--- The Minister took pains to describe the domestic political difficulties of the Lee Myung-bak Government and urged wise leadership in resolving alliance issues.

--- Both agreed it appropriate to define the U.S.-ROK alliance as more than just our security relationship. They vowed to share thoughts in the future on how best to use growing economic and cultural dimensions to strengthen our overall bilateral relationship.

--- Lee urged that alliance leaders focus on mutual benefits and greater transparency in their approach to alliance management issues. He praised USFK's follow up on the planned use of accumulated burden sharing funds as a favorable example.

--- Commenting on an article in the morning papers, Lee expressed the ROK's firm view that the relocation of the 2nd Infantry Division be completed, as planned, by no later than ¶2014.

--- Looking to the future, Lee advised: 1) that we evolve out of our military-heavy alliance by emphasizing more political and cultural understanding; and 2) that we work to expand the range of the alliance beyond Korea by enhancing our regional

and global cooperation. The Ambassador welcomed his vision and pledged to work with him on ways to bring it to reality, and explain its many benefits to the younger generation of Koreans. END SUMMARY

SUCCESSFUL SCM

¶2. (C) On October 22, Ambassador Stephens paid her introductory office call on General (ret.) Lee Sang-hee, Minister of National Defense for the Republic of Korea. The Defense Minister had recently returned from his visit to Washington to attend the October 17 Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) with Secretary Gates. The Minister praised the SCM for successfully laying the foundations for the 21st Century Strategic Alliance called for by our two Presidents. He further emphasized that the SCM had proven to be a good opportunity for allaying concerns in the ROK over the planned transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) to the ROK military in April 2012. He concluded with his personal assessment that the tone of this year's SCM was much improved. The Ambassador said that the USG also had a very positive assessment of the outcome of the SCM. She looked forward to working with the Minister to help show to all audiences what was real and mutually beneficial about the U.S.-ROK 21st Century Strategic Alliance. She assured the Minister that whatever the result of the U.S. Presidential election, the U.S. Government would retain a strong interest in broadening and deepening our enhanced alliance relationship.

ROKG DOMESTIC POLITICAL CONCERNS

¶3. (C) Defense Minister Lee spent a large portion of the meeting conveying to the Ambassador the domestic political difficulties of the Lee Myung-bak Government. Referring to the summer's anti-U.S. beef protests as a very heavy experience, Lee cautioned that great care be taken in addressing defense cost-sharing, USFK realignment and camp returns, saying we must keep our heads cool so as not to give any excuses to anyone waiting to work up anti-American elements in Korea. Koreans understood that we must have cost-sharing, but they now demanded transparency on how it was used. Korean society had changed in that regard in recent years; the ROKG must be mindful because the National Assembly had more control over the LMB Administration than our own Congress had over our Executive Branch. Maybe Korea had problems with its democratic development, he mused, but that was the reality of the situation today.

DEMOCRACY IS OUR STRENGTH

¶4. (C) The Ambassador acknowledged that democratic systems could complicate the work of governments, but added that the U.S.-ROK relationship would not be nearly as close if we were not both democracies. Democracy was the basis of the U.S.-ROK alliance and the foundation for the 21st Century Strategic Alliance we seek to build. When she last lived in Korea the relationship was primarily viewed through the lens of our military alliance and interactions Koreans had with Americans were most often with members of our armed services.

Today, the alliance had added major economic and cultural dimensions, and a much broader range of people-to-people interactions between Koreans and Americans occur every day, particularly with so many Koreans now living, working and studying in the United States. She invited the Minister to share his thoughts with her in the future on how we could use that broader and deeper base of U.S.-ROK support to strengthen our overall alliance relationship.

WE MUST FOCUS ON MUTUAL BENEFITS AND TRANSPARENCY

¶5. (C) Lee Sang-hee related that he had explained the ROKG's domestic political problems to Secretary Gates at SCM and that the Secretary had promised to provide him with plenty of good ammunition for making a strong case for the alliance. We had to show mutual benefit and transparency, Lee advised. As an example of transparency, he praised the follow-up information he had been provided by USFK after the SCM on its plans to use the approximately USD 1 billion of accumulated burden-sharing funds for base relocation construction projects over the next year. But the ROK also needed to know how much interest had accumulated on those funds, and how much longer USFK planned to use burden-sharing funds for completion of the Land Partnership Plan (LPP) base consolidation and relocation project. Commenting on a Yonhap article from that morning reporting that the U.S. and ROK were at odds over the base relocation schedule, the Minister stated that it was the ROK's firm view that we must complete the LPP by 2014. The reason he gave was that local and regional governments had to prepare for the base relocation and that they would agitate if the project did not proceed on schedule.

MAKING A CONVINCING CASE FOR A 21st CENTURY ALLIANCE

¶6. (C) Turning from a discussion of opponents to supporters,

Defense Minister Lee assured the Ambassador that Korean "conservatives" would work to keep the alliance strong. He and the ROK leadership intended to focus on a message conveying clear values that would help to overcome opposition and endure hardship. To do that he advocated:

- 1) that we evolve out of our military-heavy alliance by emphasizing more political and cultural understanding; and
- 2) that we work to expand the range of the alliance beyond Korea by enhancing our regional and global cooperation.

As I told Secretary Gates, "We must go together into that future," Lee concluded.

¶7. (SBU) The Ambassador pledged to work with the Minister of National Defense to do that, especially by building support for the alliance among Korea's younger generation.

STEPHEN